The Gujjar-Bakarwals of Poonch

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Gujjar- Bakarwals have been an integral part of the history and social fabric of Poonch for centuries. Their long-standing presence has played an important role in shaping the region's social, cultural, and political character. The community maintaining a strong presence in the region since hundreds of years as an agropastoral community contributing to economy of the region. This historical association is also reflected in the rule of Raja Rooh-ullah Sangu, a Gujjar ruler who governed Poonch from 1798 to 1819. His rule stands as an important chapter in the political history of the Gujjar community in Poonch.

Poonch presents a diverse demographic and socio-cultural composition, shaped by its religious, linguistic, caste, community and clan identities. Although the overwhelming majority of the population follows Islam, the district is also home to Hindu, Sikh, and other religious communities. According to the census 2011 figures cited, approximately 90.45% of the population follows Islam, 6.84% Hinduism, 2.35% Sikhism, and the remaining 0.36% belongs to other religious communities. However, religion alone does not fully explain the social composition of Poonch. Its population is further divided into numerous castes, clans, biradaris, and ethnolinguistic groups, each possessing its own historical traditions, social setings, and cultural characteristics.

The Gujjar-Bakarwal community constitutes one of the largest and most historically significant social groups of Poonch. The 2011 Census figures cited indicate considerable linguistic diversity among the Gujjar-Bakarwal population. Approximately 42% speak Gojri, 50% speak Pahari, 6% speak Kashmiri, while the remaining population speaks other languages including Dogri and Punjabi or linguistic varieties.

In terms of social composition, Gujjars constitute a major caste and, according to the figures cited, account for approximately 42% of the population, making them the single largest caste in Poonch- though the Gujjars objects to census figure claim much higher population because when census was conducted in 2011 a large portion of community were under migration with their livestock to upper reach in view of bi-annual seasonal migration. They are followed by other castes groups, particularly Rajputs (Domaal, Thakyal, Firozal, Mangral, Manyal, Chib, Manhas, Janjua others) and Kashmiri (Bhat, Tantarey, Ganai, Gilkar, Mir, Dar others. Kashmiri Pandits are also found in Poonch.History

Among the other important communities are Mughals, Sheikhs, Sayyids, Pashtuns , Qureshi, Brahmin, Khatri and several Rajput clans including Katochs, along with numerous other

groups. In contemporary social discourse, all the non-Gujjar communities are collectively come under the broader category of Pahari-speaking people irrespective of their religions, historical origins, caste affiliations, and clan identities.

Poonch has three Assembly constituencies-Haveli, Surankote, and Mendhar-and Gujjars have historically played an important role in the political life of the district. At present, two of the three Assembly constituencies are represented by Gujjar leaders: Javed Ahmed Rana, who represents Mendhar and serves as a Minister in the Jammu and Kashmir Government, and Chaudhary Mohammad Akram, who represents Surankote. The Haveli constituency is presently represented by a member of the Kashmiri (Pahari) community Mr.Aijaz Jan.

Gujjar representation has also been significant at the grassroots level. The previous District Development Council (DDC) in Poonch was headed by Tazeem Akhter (Chairperson) , a Gujjar woman, marking an important milestone in the political representation and participation of Gujjar women. Of the total fourteen DDC members, nine belonged to the Gujjar community, demonstrating the community's substantial presence in local democratic institutions.

At the parliamentary level, Poonch has also been represented by prominent Gujjar leadership. Mian Altaf Ahmad, a senior Gujjar political leader, represents the Anantnag-Rajouri Parliamentary constituency, which includes Poonch as well.

In twentieth century, Poonch has produced a number of distinguished Gujjar leaders who contributed to the political, social, educational, and tribal development of Jammu and Kashmir. Among the prominent names are Chaudhary Ghulam Hussain Lassanvi, popularly remembered as the "Gujjar Gandhi" for his social and political contribution, Chaudhary Wazir Mohammad Haqla, whose contribution was commemorated by the Government of India through the release of a postal stamp in his name, Chaudhary Lal Mohammad Sabir, former Minister, Chaudhary Bashir Ahmed Naz, former Chairman of the Gujjar Board and Chaudhary Mohammad Aslam, former Minister.

Poonch has also produced several other important tribal and community leaders, including Ch. Lal Hussain Mushtq, Ch.Abdul Ghani Mendharvi, Chowdhary Sadiq, Ch. Said Mohammad, Molvi Mohammad Shafi, and Chaudhary Mohammad Din Dhakad. Their contributions represent different phases of Gujjar and tribal political mobilization in the region and reflect the long-standing role of Poonch in producing leadership for the wider Gujjar community of Jammu and Kashmir.

The legacy of this early movement continued through subsequent organisations and cultural institutions. Among them, the Anjuman Taraqqi Gojri Adab Poonch played an important role in the promotion and development of Gojri language and literature.

In the contemporary period, organisations such as the Sarimastan Tribal Gurjar Welfare Foundation led by Chairman Ch. Mohammad Asad Noomani, are continuing efforts towards overall development and empowerment of tribal community. The Foundation is active under the guidance from Mohammad Irshad, DIG Police.

Poonch has also made a significant contribution to the development of education, social reform, public administration, and civil services in Jammu and Kashmir. Among the most distinguished figures of Poonch was Masud Ahmed Chowdhary, an eminent educationist, administrator, and social reformer. He played a pioneering role in establishing institutions like Gurjar Desh Charitable Trust, Jammu, and he played an important role in the establishment and development of Baba Ghulam Shah Badshah University, Rajouri.

Poonch has also produced a growing number of Gujjar officers and civil servants. Among the prominent names of community are Aijaz Asad, Owais Ahmed, Rehana Bashir, Amir Bashir, Mohammad Shabir, Ayaz Kohli, Qammar Zaman, Zafar Chowdhary, Irfan Hafiz, Iram Chowdhary, Koh-e-Safa Chowdhary, Mohd Aslam (IPS) and Yassar Bhati, among many others. Their presence in the administrative and professional services represents an important transition in the socio-economic history of the Gujjars of Poonch-from a traditionally rural and pastoral society towards greater participation in higher education, administration, governance, and other professional fields.

Another landmark achievement in the history of Poonch Gujjars is the elevation of Shahzad Azeem Chowdhary to the position of a High Court Judge in the Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh High Court in 2025. Poonch has produced a remarkable number of Gujjar authors, poets, researchers, and literary figures who have made a lasting contribution to the development and enrichment of Gojri language and literature, while also contributing to the wider literary traditions of Punjabi and other regional languages. Among the notable literary personalities associated with the Gujjar community of Poonch are Sain Faqir Din Trabhi, Khuda Baksh Zaar, Shams Din Mehjoor Poonchi, Hussan Din Hussan, Babu Noor Mohammad Noor, Khadam Hussain Qamar, Babu Faiz Ahmed, Amin Qammar and Sain Mohammad Din Saqi. Through their poetry, prose, research, and literary activities, these writers helped enrich the Gojri literary tradition and gave expression to the social experiences, cultural memory, folk traditions, emotions, and aspirations of the Gujjar people. Their work also demonstrates the multilingual character of Poonch's literary culture, where Gojri and Punjabi have historically interacted with other languages spoken in the region.Jammu news portal

The poetic character of Poonch has also been celebrated in the spiritual and cultural traditions of the region. A well-known saying attributed to the eminent Gujjar saint Hazrat Mian

Abdullah Larvi (RA), popularly known as Baba Ji Sahib, captures this distinctive literary atmosphere. He is reported to have remarked that Poonch is so poetic that even its mountains write poetry. The saying beautifully expresses the perception of Poonch as a land deeply connected with poetry, spirituality, folklore, and natural beauty.

The literary tradition established by earlier generations continues to flourish in the present day. Contemporary writers and researchers such as Fazal Hussain Mushtaq, Sikander Hayat Tariq, Shamsher Hakla , Dr. Rafeeq Anjum, Abdul Ghani Ghayoor, Ayaz Saif, Raiz Sabir, Lal Hussain Gohar, Nighat Chowdhary, Jahanger Asghar, Atta Ullah Shad, and Mohammad Rafi are making significant contributions to the promotion, preservation, documentation, and development of Gojri language and literature.

A large section of the Gujjar-Bakarwal population of Poonch continues to follow its traditional biannual migration to the upper reaches of the Pir Panjal mountains, moving with their livestock in search of seasonal pastures. During the summer months, they settle in dhoks, or high-altitude pastoral settlements, many of which have been traditionally used by their families and clans for generations. The community contributes significantly to the local economy by supplying milk and other dairy products including the Kaladhi cheese, meat, wool, and poultry, thereby supporting the needs of communities across the region.

The traditional arts and crafts of the Gujjar-Bakarwal community of Poonch are an important part of the cultural heritage of the distrct. A few times ago, the District Administration Poonch officially launched the iconic Gojri ethnic topi, locally known as the Lachko, on the e-commerce platform Meesho. The initiative, undertaken through the Department of Handicrafts and Handloom, has helped bring this distinctive traditional headwear of Gujjar women to a wider market while creating new opportunities for the artisans who preserve this centuries-old craft.

Thus, Poonch's contribution to Gujjar history and culture extends beyond politics and social leadership. Its literary and intellectual heritage represents another important dimension of the region's contribution to Gujjar cultural awakening, making Poonch one of the significant centres of literary expression and cultural scholarship in Jammu and Kashmir. javaidrahi@gmail.com

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